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U.S. Aides Assert Some Arms Sent to Iran Were for Afghan Rebels Fighting Soviets

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WASHINGTON—Some of the U.S. arms secretly shipped to Iran were intended for Moslem guerrillas battling Soviet forces in Afghanistan, U.S. intelligence sources assert.

As part of their effort to explain the Reagan administration's dealings with Iran, National Security Adviser John Poindexter and other officials told congressional leaders last week that one previously unstated purpose of the secret Iran operation was to open a new supply route to the hard-pressed Afghan rebels.

Specifically, intelligence sources said,

Iranian officials agreed to pass some 100 of the 2,008 TOW anti-tank missiles they received from the U.S. along to the neighboring Afghans. Another source said some of the arms shipped to Iran from Israel also were intended for the Afghan rebels, known as the mujaheddin.

"One of the purposes was to get help for the mujaheddin," said one source. But he said he was uncertain whether any weapons ever reached Afghanistan.

The rebels' existing supply routes—through Pakistan and China—are operating at capacity, according to the U.S. intelligence sources. Moreover, some administration officials are worried that growing Soviet pressure might force the Pakistanis to curtail support for the Afghan rebels.

The sources also said the Iranians offered to send the U.S. a Soviet-made T-72 tank captured from Iraq. But they said the Iranians haven't delivered, in part because of the publicity about their dealings with the U.S.

President Reagan has said the secret arms shipments were intended to open a channel to moderate Iranian leaders and to help win the release of hostages in Lebanon. The claim that the sales also were designed partly to help the Afghan rebels has drawn mixed reviews on Capitol Hill. Some lawmakers believe trying to open a new supply line to the Afghans was a legitimate gamble, but others regard the latest administration claim as an attempt to rationalize the secret Iran operation after the fact.

The administration's congressional briefings last week left even some top Republican leaders wondering if the administration has told the whole story. Some lawmakers say they are confused by the administration's sometimes conflicting accounts of the operation and concerned that the Iran policy was unwise and inept.

Intelligence sources said the arms sale to Iran, authorized by a secret directive signed last January by President Reagan, included the 2,008 TOW anti-tank missiles.

The sources said Israel shipped 508 TOW missiles to Iran last September, and that the Central Intelligence Agency, with the help of civilian officials in the Pentagon, requisitioned additional TOWs and other equipment from military stockpiles in Europe and the U.S.

The sources said the arms then were shipped to Iran via Israel, and perhaps other countries, on cargo planes chartered by the CIA.

The arrangements for the shipments, the sources said, were made by U.S. and Israeli officials and by Israeli and Iranian arms dealers. The Iranians, the sources said, deposited \$12 million in a Swiss bank account, which the CIA then tapped to repay the Defense Department for the arms and spare parts.

According to Defense Department figures, 2,008 TOW missiles alone would cost almost \$20 million. The total value of the arms shipped to Iran remains unknown.

Administration officials have said that before shipping the arms, they had offered the Iranians American wheat, ball bearings and medical supplies as evidence of U.S. good faith. But they said the Iranians insisted on arms and spare parts.